

SWEET SORROW

The director of our 2008 *Romeo and Juliet*, Neil Bartlett, asks why is the play still such good box office? And why is it considered the ideal introduction to the glories of Shakespeare for impressionable young school students?

This article first appeared in the show programme for RSC's 2008 Romeo and Juliet.

Half way through rehearsals for the RSC's 2008 production of Romeo and Juliet, director Neil Bartlett pauses for thought.

Why is *Romeo and Juliet* still such good box office? And why (perhaps a more interesting question) is this particular play, with its foul-mouthed, testosterone-drenched young men, its vivid portrayal of a sexually-charged teenage heroine and her wayward, immature, impulsive and finally murderous lover, considered the ideal introduction to the glories of Shakespeare for impressionable young school students?

No matter how much audiences and producers want to see the story through the rose-tinted glasses of sentiment, the fact remains that it's a pretty brutal piece. Half way through rehearsals as I am as I write this, I think the clues to the answers may lie not just in the iconic story itself, but in the way it is told.

Consider the way it begins. The first scene is a masterpiece of scenography - in barely 50 lines, a potentially murderous street brawl escalates from a few moronic insults into a freeze-frame portrayal of an entire city trapped in a vicious circle of patriarchal pride, aggression and facesaving. So far, so good - a full-company crowd scene never goes amiss at the top of the show, there's not too much blank verse, and there's some sexy knife-work - no chance of anyone getting bored so far, and if the choreography is noisy enough, hopefully they won't notice that the insults are in fact all pretty impenetrable late sixteenth century doubles entendres.

But the real impact (the real brilliance) of the opening comes from the fact that this famously hot-tempered and fast-paced play doesn't actually start with this crowd scene at all. It starts with something much cooler, much more singular - and more challenging. The actors stand in front of the audience and, in the words of the famous prologue, do exactly what you're never supposed to do in the theatre: tell everyone how the story ends. As soon as those famous lines are over ('Two households, both alike in dignity...') the telling of the story is set up to work in a very particular way. Having heard the words of the prologue means that all the time we're getting carried away by the heat of the story-telling, by the Italian setting, by the poetry, we can't avoid the fact that we, the audience, already know what the characters

don't, namely that the way they're behaving is going to lead, step by deliberate or accidental step, to the mutilation and violent deaths of the two young people whose beautiful faces and bodies are splashed across the poster as the main attraction of the evening.

Imagine for a moment what watching the play would be like if we *didn't* know they were going to die; it would be entirely different. We're set up to get involved in the story not just for the pleasures of its *what*, but for the challenges of its *how* and its *why*.

I think there's another clue to the enduring appeal of the play buried in those opening lines. The two households (pace West Side Story and all the other versions that have situated the Capulets and the Montagues on opposite sides of various cultural or racial tracks) are enemies, but they are precisely not different; the two households are both *alike* in dignity. Their children's problem is not that they are trapped in a divided world, but that they're growing up in one of stifling uniformity. Verona is a city with very rigid definitions of how young men and women should behave - boys must first obey and then turn into their violent fathers, and girls must do as they're told.

Anyone who has ever felt as a teenager that the world is conspiring against them to limit their choices (ie: more or less everyone) can identify with the first appearances of the hero or heroine (with either gleeful immediacy or rueful hindsight, depending on what age they are when they see the play).

Romeo, an only son, has stopped talking to his father and is desperately trying to shrug off the crushing weight of his family's expectations by staying out all night, refusing to get involved in the hypermasculine posturing of the vendetta and instead pouring all his energy into lurid poetic fantasies about an inappropriate girlfriend.

Juliet, an only daughter, is so busy getting ready for a party that she does not at first realise that her mother is grooming her to receive some very bad news, namely that a month short of her fourteenth birthday her parents are ready to hand her over to the richer, older man they have decided she should marry.

This is the tragedy of two children who, in extremis, instinctively glimpse in each other a possible escape route from otherwise dead-end lives. This may seem a harsh perspective from which to view a play that goes on to flower into some of the most immediate and effective evocations of desire in the language (current favourite sexy line: 'Spread thy close curtain, love-performing night...'), but the life of the play lies as much in its ruthless and swift-as-an-oncoming-truck depiction of a dysfunctional culture as it does in its famous love scenes.

If these 400- and-something year-old pages of blank verse still have something to tell us (and the box office figures rather indicate that they do) then it is not that love makes the world go round, or that parting is such sweet sorrow, or that standing sighing on a balcony in a nightie is the meaning of romance, or that playing with knives is sexy, but rather that the patriarchy works by stifling young lives and, if necessary, by taking them, and that the fight to escape from its clutches is sometimes a fight to the death. Now that is a story worth telling to an audience of schoolchildren...